Early Introduction of Automobiles into Fairbury Life

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The story of automobiles being introduced in Fairbury started with William Jennings Brethard (1858-1937). Several different sources indicate that he was the first person in Livingston County to purchase an automobile. Unfortunately, the year of the purchase and the model are unknown. The June 1901 Blade recounted that H. J. Ramsey bought a new Stanhope and now travels back and forth between his store and house in grand style. This information indicates Bethard purchased his automobile sometime before 1901.

W. J. Bethard was a prominent businessman in Fairbury. He operated a department store on the east end of Fairbury that competed with Walton's Bros. store. The Blade published an article recounting the July 4, 1904 parade. There were three automobiles in that parade. T. S. O. McDowell owned the first car. Mr. McDowell was dressed as Uncle Sam, and Miss Westervelt was dressed to represent Columbia. Chester Claudon owned the second automobile. In that second car, Chester Claudon, P. J. Hawk, and Palmer Westervelt were dressed to represent the Army. W. J. Bethard drove the last automobile. In the third car, W. J. Bethard's son Fred and Charles Swarm were dressed to represent the Navy.

Initially, there were hundreds of automobile manufacturers in the United States. The early cars were costly. Because of their high cost, the first owners of automobiles were usually doctors or wealthy businessmen. The doctors were eager to replace their horses and buggies with a car to make their house calls to patients. A typical 1907 automobile had a price of about $850. This price would be equivalent to about $23,611 in today's dollars. By 1925, Henry Ford's Model T reduced the price to $300, or about $4,450 in today's dollars.

Early automobiles were powered by steam, battery power, or gasoline internal combustion engines. It took a few years before the industry settled on using only gasoline-powered engines.

A book titled List of Automobile Licenses Issued by James A. Rose, Secretary of the State of Illinois, lists all license plates issued to Illinois residents in 1907, 1908, and 1909. This book recounts that only 10 Fairbury residents owned an automobile in 1907.

T. S. O. McDowell was issued license plate number 184 for his automobile manufactured by the White Company. This vehicle was steam-powered and sold for $3,500, or $97,221 in today's dollars. The average working annual salary was $542, so it would take the average worker 6.5 years to pay for this car. T. S. O. McDowell (1858-1911) was a wealthy Fairbury banker and businessman.

J. W. Walton was the brother of Isaac Walton. They owned and operated the Walton Bros. department store in Fairbury for many years. His license plate number 420 was for a 1907 Stevens-Duryea automobile. This auto manufacturer offered three models in 1907, and they were all gasoline-powered. The runabout was $2,400, the limousine was $3,300, and the seven-seater with a massive six-cylinder engine was $5,000. The seven-seater, with its tulipwood body, would cost $139,00 in today's dollars.

Dr. Samuel Mathers Barnes (1846-1928) practiced medicine in Fairbury for many years. He was a physician of unusual skill and success and, for a long time, was the surgeon for the T.P. & W. Railroad. In addition, he was the Mayor of Fairbury. He was issued license plate number 1640 for his Winton automobile.

The Winton Motor Carriage Company of Cleveland, Ohio, is credited with being the first company in the United States to sell a motor car. The vehicles were termed "horseless carriages" and included gas lamps, padded seats, and rubber tires made by the Goodrich Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio. The Winton automobiles were often built with wealthy and affluent individuals in mind. The cars were often enormous, luxurious, and very elegant. The seven-passenger Winton Model M touring car had a price tag of $3,500.

Nicholas B. Claudon (1855-1915) was a prominent Fairbury businessman who started a grain business where Ace Hardware is now located. Next, he moved the grain business to the current location of Farmer's Grain on East Walnut Street. After finishing high school, his son Chester J. Claudon (1884-1980) joined him in the grain business. In 1907, C. J. Claudon received license plate number 2225 for his Dayton automobile. Since he was only twenty-three years old, his father likely purchased the car. C. J. Claudon later became one of the pioneer auto dealers in central Illinois selling the Stoddard-Dayton brand.

Dr. Henry A. Presler (1869-1946) was a veterinarian in Fairbury for 24 years. He was also a Mayor of Fairbury. Dr. Presler was issued license plate number 5152 for his Maxwell automobile. The Maxwell dealership in Fairbury was located where Steidinger Tire is now located on Locust Street.

William Jennings Bethard owned and operated a department store on the east end of Locust Street. His store was a competitor to the Walton Bros. store. W. J. Bethard was issued license plate number 6579 for his Studebaker.

Robert A. Mack (1870-1947) was a farmer and businessman. He farmed 6 miles north of Fairbury. He owned the Illinois Hotel (where the new City Hall is now located) and was a Director at The Commercial State Bank. His Maxwell was issued license plate number 7256.

Thomas A. Beach (1828-1911) was a Fairbury banker and businessman. It is estimated that when he died, he was worth $50 million in today's dollars. His "Lion House" on East Hickory street is on the National Register of Historic Places. His Pope-Waverly was issued license number 8717. The Pope-Waverly was a battery-operated electric car.

Joseph Jesse Slagel (1883-1915) was a Fairbury inventor who operated a machine shop at the northwest corner of Locust and Sixth Streets. His Cadillac was issued license number 9062.

Dr. Leroy Kuhn was a surgeon and practiced medicine in Fairbury. His Maxwell was issued license number 9876.

Of the ten Illinois license plates issued to Fairbury citizens in 1907, seven of the automobile owners were businessmen, two were medical doctors, and one was a veterinarian. Three of the ten cars were Maxwell's, and seven different manufacturers made the rest. This 1907 information illustrates that early automobiles were too expensive to be owned by the common working man, and there were hundreds of car manufacturers.

1907 Maxwell Automobile